Tagore and Critical Cosmopolitanism

When a student at Shri Vivekananda High School situated among the cane-fields of Nadi, I recall coming across a poem by Rabindranath Tagore. It was included in an anthology, entitled *Waves,* edited by Vijay Mishra. Last year, when I was attempting to organize a similar event in Fiji, my co-convenor, who was schooled in another institution on another island, suddenly began reciting lines from this poem. We were on identical wavelength precisely because he, too, possessed a copy of *Waves*. The poem is the widely-known 'Where the Mind is without Fear.' Speaking aesthetically, it is difficult to enjoy Tagore in translation. The English renditions are pedestrian, sentimental and the metaphors exhausted. One is only too alert to the irony in the line where "the clear stream of reason" loses its way in "the dreary desert sand of dead habit" (Tagore, 1920, 27). For here we are tripped up by an unintended paradox: dead habit warning us against dead habit. Be that as it may, what *is* compelling about Tagore's poetry, and this view extends to his work in other genres, is the ethico-political ground they break in an era of navel-gazing nationalism. Another line from 'Where the Mind is Without Fear,' which has haunted me for many years, boldly announces this new position: "Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls" (Tagore, 1920, 27). Tagore rejects outright a world made up of walled-up fragments because in such fragmentation there is no real freedom. A narrow domesticity inheres in such forms of sequestering and excludes the possibility of variousness. Variousness, because it includes the many in one and the one in many, is freedom's limitless potentiality. It is this obstinate, not to say ethical, refusal to be partitioned off from the world that endears one to Tagore.

Tagore's refusal to be swayed by militant nationalism (powerfully captured in Satyajit Ray's cinematic rendition of *The Home and the World)*, his distaste for homegrown jingoism as well as colonial hubris, his caveat against unquestioning imitations of western norms, his ambivalence to the idea of home, his non-prescriptive view of spirituality, his globetrotting ways and the admiration he drew from the western literati, his readiness to engage with cultural outsiders and his subtle but troubled tolerance of science and technological progress—all testify to a heightened degree of 'critical cosmopolitanism.' You will notice that I have two key terms in my title. Let me explain how I intend to use them. The first is an adjective, critical, whereas the second, cosmopolitanism, is a noun. By critical I do not mean to suggest the censorious position one might possibly adopt towards some subject or state of affairs. Rather, I want to use it in the sense employed in literary circles, that is, as a structure of feeling and an attitude of mind where one weighs up the merit of one position or another in the unpredictable and shape-changing adventure of forming an opinion. And Tagore, as is widely acknowledged, shape-changed his opinion at different times and in different contexts. The critical mind is able to weigh up multiple possibilities, one after another in an unfolding series, and sometimes paradoxically, in the deliberate but nuanced act of forming a judgment. The second key term,

cosmopolitanism, does not come with the blessing of the protagonist of this talk. In 1916, Tagore dismissed the noun for its "colourless vagueness" (Tagore, 1917, 15). Far be it for me to vex the hereafter by calling the poet a citizen of this world, which, as you might have guessed, is the root meaning of that term. My ambition is fairly modest in that I understand the cosmopolite to be an individual who goes beyond the local or the limit in their understanding of life's variousness. The cosmopolite is one who has shaken off what Tagore, referring to the layout of western cities, labels the "city-wall habit" (Tagore, 1966, 5). When brought together, 'critical cosmopolitanism' denotes the art of weighing up multiple possibilities in the act of forming an opinion that exceeds the local and the limit it curiously includes. Tagore's genius is best displayed in his capacity to be in a position of intimate dissension with the local and the limit (India, Bengal, Hinduism, caste, inherited practices, etc.) while, at the same time, being in a condition of dissenting intimacy with the non-local or the non-limit (West, democracy, nationalism, instrumental modernity, etc.). To put it in a nutshell: he was an insider who thought from the outside and an outsider who thought from the inside. The peculiar element in this equation is that his critical opinion as an insider to India, which opinion rendered him an outsider, was never simply the critical opinion of the West. Similarly, his critical stance as an outsider to the West, which put him inside its great political, artistic and cultural debates, was never simply the critical stance of the East. In other words, Tagore subsisted in a state of critical excess to the local and the limit as well as to the non-local and the non-limit. By virtue of this fact, he belonged to a truly universal polity. Certainly in this sense, he was following in the footsteps of his talented forerunner, Raja Rammohan Roy. Roy was an admirer of western humanism and used it to resurrect humanist values he thought he detected in the scriptural tradition of India. He was instrumental in lobbying for a legislation that banned the practice of sati in 1829, arguing that Hinduism did not countenance it. He also proposed an amalgamation of Eastern and Western ideals and practices. Tagore defended Roy's legacy with great passion, doubtless because he discerned in the latter an earlier avatar of himself. Rammohan Roy, he believed, had been the first to be rid of unyielding orthodoxies and the mind's city-wall habits:

> No blind belief, no ancestral habit was allowed to obscure his vision. With a wonderful breadth of heart and intellect he accepted the West without betraying the East…
>
> The true wealth of India was not hidden from him, for this he had already made his own. Consequently he had with him the touchstone by which he could test the wealth of others. He did not sell himself by holding out a beggar's palms, but assessed the true value of whatever he took (Tagore in Guha, 2011, 174).

Tagore was enormously influenced by this account of Roy, but his own position as a critical cosmopolite may be captured, not so much in the idea of synthesis, although he did use the term, but rather in the concept of synergy, that is to say, the cooperative but argumentative

action of separate and distinct parts to create an effect greater than the sum of them. He once commented that the "East and West met in friendship in my own person." (Tagore cit. Dutta & Robinson, 1995, 77), but a more accurate picture of his real position is embodied in another remark:

> I sometimes detect within myself a battle-ground where two opposing forces are constantly in action, one beckoning me to peace and cessation of all strife, the other egging me to battle. It is as though the restless energy and the will to action of the West were perpetually assaulting the citadel of my Indian placidity. Hence this swing of the pendulum between passionate pain and calm detachment, between lyrical abandon and philosophizing, between love of my country and mockery of patriotism, between an itch to enter the lists and a longing to remain wrapt in thought. This continual struggle brings in its train a mood compounded of frustration and resignation (Tagore cit. Dutta & Robinson, 1995, 107).

The internal synergy he describes above is evident in almost everything he wrote. One of the more compelling examples of Tagore's ability to be simultaneously inside and outside all orthodoxies and dogmas is his long essay on nationalism published in 1917, four years after he won the Nobel Prize for Literature. Tagore takes no prisoners in his sustained critique, commencing his essay with the trenchant observation: "Neither the colourless vagueness of cosmopolitanism, nor the fierce self-idolatry of nation-worship is the goal of human history" (Tagore, 1917, 15). He proceeds to observe that the nation, by which he means nationalism as invented, managed and exported by the autocentred bourgeois nation-state, encourages competition not cooperation and fosters a "psychology of the primitive fighting elements rather than of humanity seeking its completeness through the union based upon mutual self-surrender" (Tagore, 1917, 21). He adds:

> This state of things inevitably gives rise to eternal feuds among the elements freed from the wholeness and wholesomeness of human ideals, and interminable economic war is waged between capital and labour. For greed of wealth and power can never have a limit, and compromise of self-interest can never attain the final spirit of reconciliation (Tagore, 1917, 22).

In this respect he is at variance with B.R. Ambedkar, one of the principle architects of the Indian constitution. The latter felt that the political nation of India, founded on enlightened constitutionalism, could not be transformed into an imagined community unless the obscene schisms of caste, which, he felt, were socio-economic schisms in the first instance, were genuinely addressed and transcended. Caste, according to Ambedkar, was not simply the division of labour; it was the hereditary division of labourers (Ambedkar in Guha, 2001, 187-201). In this respect, he was echoing Marx's position as articulated in 'The Future Results of

British Rule in India' (Marx, 1976, 494-499). Tagore conceded that caste was divisive and stultifying, but felt that the abstract nation was not the solution to this state of affairs. He reasoned that the bourgeois logic of market competition, fed on the dogma of nationalism, was always potentially imperialistic, and therefore disastrous to all human relations. The nation was deeply mired in narrow city-wall habits.

But even as he fumed and fulminated against the nation, Tagore decouples it from the spirit of a people, including the British, on the grounds that the nation is an abstraction, and "is neither British nor anything else; it is an applied science and therefore more or less similar in its principles wherever it is used" (Tagore, 1917, 28). India, he argues, should not be compelled to adopt this abstract machine-like political and economic system. Conflictive social relations grounded in a dehumanized scientific outlook are not, he makes it clear, the goal of our species life. He does not let his country off the hook either:

> …India has been trying to accomplish her task through social regulation of differences, on the one hand, and the spiritual recognition of unity, on the other. She has made grave errors in setting up the boundary walls too rigidly between races, in perpetuating the results of inferiority in her classifications; often she has crippled her children's minds and narrowed their lives in order to fit them into her social forms (Tagore, 1917, 15).

If the nation is not desirable, neither is the static and inflexible hierarchy of caste.

Tagore's critique of the tabulated stasis of a caste-based society is allegorically portrayed in 'An Implausible Story,' set in a kingdom of personified playing cards. Political power and social status are assumed by picture cards, and ranked, and their lineage traced according to whether they are diamonds, hearts, clubs or spades. Some numbered cards are socially irrelevant or even outside the hierarchy. The rules of government and social intercourse are predetermined through inherited practices, and there is an insipid conformity to this state of affairs. Enter into this world three shipwrecked strangers, one a prince. Not conforming to any set patterns or practices, they upset the social order by infringing on rules and conventions, that is to say, by making incorrect moves. Eventually their different presence makes a difference, and the card people start to awaken from their fossil-like torpor:

> They began to observe that one did not always have to work the same way, that another direction was possible; there was this road and there was that road. The three lively young foreigners had demonstrated to them that man has a freedom beyond restrictions (Tagore, 1965, 25).

In the early play, *The Post Office,* it is the dying boy, Amal, who is the restive prince of 'An Implausible Story.' Under the physician's injunction to stay indoors, Amal longs to travel

beyond the hill framed inside his window and to "see everything that there is" (Tagore, 1968, 13). Since he is prohibited to do so, he admits the world into the space of his confinement by accosting passers-by: dairyman, watchman, headman, and the girl Sudha. He learns of the world in this manner. Amal's tireless queries, counter-arguments, and an unshakeable faith in making the potential actual, alter the perception of those around him. His compulsive variousness makes their world, too, various. In this play, Tagore is already starting to lay the groundwork for the philosophy of variousness he develops later, and the essay on nationalism is the most polemical account of this philosophy.

In that essay, as we have seen, Tagore occupies a space outside modernity through offering an insider's grasp of political economy while advancing an insider's critique of indigenous social relations which puts him outside those very forms. If he rails against the "personal government" of pre-British India responsible for tyranny, injustice and extortion (Tagore, 1917, 30), he also celebrates its focus on the attainment of spiritual ideals (Tagore, 1917, 16); if he lauds Britain for introducing into India "a universal standard of justice," rule of law and the idea of progressive civilization, he also reprimands it, in its role as a nation, for withholding nutrition and education from Indians, and for its many acts of exploitation (Tagore, 1917, 31-33). By internalizing opposing points of view in the process of forming an opinion, he creates a standard or touchstone that is outside both viewpoints; it is this elusive standard, neither west nor east and yet negotiating both, that renders him a critical cosmopolite. The standard operates somewhat in the manner of a transcendent category that incites from the other side, the absolute point, and is therefore the object of an aspiration rather than that of a destination. It is this yardstick, which he calls "the moral law," that allows Tagore to come up with a wondrously complex Hegelian insight into the consequences of western hypocrisy and double-think:

> …[T]he exclusive civilization which thrives upon others who are barred from its benefit carries its own death sentence in its moral limitations. The slavery that it gives rise to unconsciously drains its own love of freedom dry. The helplessness with which it weighs down its world of victims exerts its force of gravitation every moment upon the power that creates it (Tagore, 1917, 34).

Tagore is making the important point that in a slave-master relationship freedom is impossible for both parties as slave and master are equally unfree in their bondage even though one exerts more power than the other. Sublation would involve a mutual recognition of this unhappy condition.

Tagore did not restrict his critical opinion to the nations of the West; he was just as severe on Asian nations that modeled themselves in the looking-glass of Europe. While admiring bushido

or the ancient Japanese code of conduct, he was scathing when it came to Japan's decision to emulate the western nation-state:

> Japan is the youngest disciple of Europe—she has no soul—she is all science—and she has no sentiment to spare for other people than her own (Tagore cit. Dutta & Robinson, 1995, 201).

Tagore understood that every nation, by virtue of being a nation, was potentially imperialistic and that the violence of economic competition could not be decoupled from general violence between nation-states which he called the "brotherhood of hooliganism" (Tagore, 1917, 38). What he desired was cooperation between personal men (as opposed to the abstract competitive men of the nation) bound together by a moral law that was present everywhere but eluded definition. He once wrote: "I am frightened by an abstraction which is ready to ignore living reality" (Tagore cit. Dutta & Robinson, 1995, 146). Writing to his son from North America in 1917, he spoke of Shantiniketan as a place transcending nations and geography:

> I have in mind to make Shantiniketan the connecting thread between India and the world. I have to found a world centre for the study of humanity there. The days of petty nationalism are numbered—let the first step towards universal union occur in the fields of Bolpur. I want to make that place somewhere beyond the limits of nation and geography" (Tagore cit. Dutta & Robinson, 1995, 205).

The critical cosmopolite in Tagore was honed to such a degree that he spared no view, culture or subject. In fact, as Nirad Chaudhuri has astutely observed, Tagore was in a position of heresy with regard to most orthodoxies:

> Tagore challenged all political, social, cultural, and religious superstitions, and was therefore regarded an apostate (Tagore cit. Dutta & Robinson, 1995, 149).

Gurudev himself expressed it as follows:

> I have always been attacked by political groups, religious groups, literary groups, social groups and so on. If I belonged to the opposition camp, each group would have forgiven me. That I do not belong to any group makes them all angry. No one will be able to put a chain on my feet (Tagore cit. Dutta & Robinson, 1995, 230).

The ability to occupy a third position, at least in theory if not in practice (he did after all marry off his daughters as children while arguing against child marriages), neither inside nor outside and yet hyphenating both, contributed to some moments of heightened perception. He wrote the following against violent nationalism at home:

> Many of us have the illusion that our subjection is not like a headache, an ailment pestering us from within, but like a load on the head, pressing down on us from without in the shape of the British Government; and that relief will be ours as soon as we can shake off that load by some means or other. Well, the matter is not so simple as all that. The British Government is not the cause or our subjection; it is merely a symptom of a deeper subjection on our part (Tagore cit. Dutta & Robinson, 1995, 152).

The poet is appealing for no less than the decolonization of the spirit that terminates the master-slave dialectic of colonial bondage.

For W.B. Yeats, who met Tagore in London, it was the quality of the outsider as presenting a purer image of the insider that was attractive. Writing on *Gitanjali,* to which volume he contributed an impassioned introduction (although he later revised his opinion), Yeats declared that the west is "moved not because of its strangeness, but because we have met our own image" (Tagore cit. Dutta & Robinson, 1995, 169). Back in India, Tagore's compatriots might have rephrased the Irish poet in this manner: "We are moved not because of its familiarity, but because we have met with our own strange image."

It is this sense of Tagore being a counter-image in the looking-glass of cultures that contributed to the turbulent but always respectful relationship between him and Gandhi. At the height of their wrangle when Gandhi, arguing for Swaraj, reminded Tagore of his remark that Indians should not be "poor copies of westerners," Gurudev replied:

> Gandhiji, the whole world is suffering today from the cult of a selfish and short-sighted nationalism. India has all down her history offered hospitality to the invader of whatever nation, creed or colour. I have come to believe that, as Indians, we not only have much to learn from the West but that we also have something to contribute. We dare not shut the West out" (Tagore cit. Dutta & Robinson, 1995, 239).

In this rejoinder Tagore might have put his finger on the origins of his world view. Since India contained multitudes as part of its long impure history, it was unthinkable as well as impossible to maintain a purely univocal position with respect to oneself. One was already several. In a poem from the 1916 collection *Fruit-Gathering*, the persona, like the author, is unable to walk the narrow lane of uncritical orthodoxy:

> They knew the way and went to seek you along the narrow lane, but I wandered abroad into the night for I was ignorant. I was not schooled enough to be afraid of you in the dark, therefore I came upon your doorstep unaware. The wise rebuked me and bade me be gone, for I had not come by the lane. I turned away in doubt, but you held me fast, and their scolding became louder every day (Tagore, 1923, 9).

Perhaps Tagore's finest insight into variousness, a variousness largely freed from an anthropocentric bias, is contained in a passage from *Sadhana.* In this passage, Tagore remarks "that there is no such thing as absolute isolation in existence, and the only way of attaining truth is through the interpenetration of our being into all objects" (Sadhana, 1966, 4). Here we have a vision of variousness that empathetically goes beyond the human to subsume radical others: animals, plants, minerals, sea, sky, stones, etc. It is a compelling vision from a man who chose to think in broad planetary terms.

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